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NIO/EA
1 October 1985A NORTH-SOUTH SUMMIT IN KOREA--BUT WHAT ABOUT RANGOON?

Preparations for a summit between North Korean strongman Kim Il-sung and South Korean president Chun Tu-hwan [] in anticipation of a meeting between the two leaders later this year in Pyongyang.

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Representatives from each side traded visits to the respective capitals this month []

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[] The summit would be the high point of increasing contacts between the Koreas this year, including precedent shattering family reunification visits last month. Although tensions and suspicions are likely to remain high on both sides for some time, the visits could herald a new era in North-South relations if the initial contacts result in meaningful and mutual confidence building measures.

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North Korea's motivations for the new initiative are unclear. Some believe Pyongyang finds Seoul's political, economic and military progress vis-a-vis its own sufficiently disturbing to require a true about face in the handling of relations with the South. Economic stagnation at home, a costly defense burden, and international censure in the wake of the Rangoon bombing, compared with the South's dynamism dictate a new more conciliatory approach. Kim Chong-il's assumption of greater governmental responsibilities and/or his father's wish to smooth the path ahead for his son's rule may also account in part for the attitude. Others, with a more cynical view of the developments, believe that while its tactics may change, the North's desire eventually to reunify the peninsula under its control, even by military force if necessary, remains the same. They argue that Pyongyang wants to show a more peaceful attitude in order to encourage a resumption of western economic assistance and to normalize relations with the United States--the latter seen as a way of securing both assistance and a withdrawal of US military forces from the peninsula. Conciliatory gestures, they argue, also best positions Pyongyang to exploit political dissension in the South. In short, they view North Korea's public posturing as deceiving and believe the Kims are up to no good.

In the South, President Chun's willingness to explore an improvement in relations with Pyongyang, even a first ever meeting of heads of state, surprised many Korea watchers. []

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Where to go beyond the visit to Pyongyang does not appear well thought out. Some observers believe that Chun seeks a summit to boost his sagging fortunes at home and a grandstand play used to justify maintaining his rule

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The military will likely be nervous about Chun's journey to Pyongyang and the most skeptical about the prospects for positive results.

Regardless of the motives of the two leaders, increased contacts and the beginnings of a high level dialogue between North and South augurs well for an eventual lessening of tensions on the peninsula. Both leaders may have only narrow cynical purposes for the meeting, but it could nevertheless be a major breakthrough in the longstanding, highly volatile impasse between the two Koreas. Although we should guard against premature optimism, we should also press both sides to accept real confidence building measures, particularly along the DMZ.

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[REDACTED] the potential significance of confidence building measures by Pyongyang have increased dramatically.

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